# WHERE WE LOVE IS HOME

May 13, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
Romans 8:12-17
Luke 3:21-22

**"Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."**
-Luke 3:22b (RSV)

Before he was a best-selling author, Robert Fulghum was a minister and so some of his funniest and best reflections are about religion and the church.

He writes:

> "For twenty-five years of my life, the second Sunday in May was trouble. Being the minister of a church, I was obliged in some way to address the subject of Mother's Day. It could not be avoided. I tried that. Mind you, the congregation was quite open-minded actually, and gave me free rein in the pulpit. But when it came to the second Sunday in May, the expectations were summarized in these words of one of the more outspoken women in the church: 'I'm bringing my MOTHER to church on MOTHER'S DAY, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include MOTHER, and it had better be GOOD!' She was joking... She also meant it." [It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, p. 100]

In theological seminary the professors tell you that Mother's Day is not a religious holiday; in fact it is a reflection of the sociological/ anthropological/cultural and embarrassingly sentimental phenomenon of MOMISM which has been created and sustained essentially by the greeting card people, clothing retailers and florists. The professors who tell you these things do not preach to a congregation on the second Sunday of May obviously. The young clergyperson takes this very seriously and then faithfully tells his or her congregation this wonderful new information on Mother's Day and shortly thereafter encounters the first major career crisis. In my case it was over a hymn. For years the congregation, on Mother's Day, had sung the old favorite, "Faith of our fathers! living still" and changed it to "Faith of our mothers!" Well, I put a stop to that practice, and very nearly my ministry as well.

It is the third biggest holiday in terms of commercial activity, after Christmas and Easter. One hundred and forty million greeting cards are sold, very few humorous ones, Fulghum points out. This is serious: Mother's Day is not noted for comedy. Seven billion dollars is spent for presents and meals. Sixty million roses. [see Fulghum, p. 101]

Somewhere in the middle of all that, we are, I think, trying to find a way to say something that is very important to us. There is, in addition to the second Sunday in May, a Mother's Day that happens for all of us annually. It's your birthday. I always thought that ought to be Mother's Day. After all, all you did that day was show up. Your mother did all the work. So call her on your birthday: thank her for what she did for you on that day. That's Mother's Day. On the second Sunday of May, we are expressing something of our love, our nostalgia perhaps; sometimes some of us are expressing something of our pain; sometimes something of our concern about the family and the values it imparted to us. We are expressing something of our feelings about those relationships that continue to be the most powerful in our lives: our relationships with our parents, our children, our families.

We observe Mother's Day this year in the midst of an emerging consensus that the American family has changed radically and that it is in a lot of trouble. It is true at every level of our culture. The wealthiest, a New York Times editorial observed, are often guilty of child neglect by their consistent absence. Those in the middle are so busy, working so hard to get ahead, they have no time nor energy for family. And for the poor, not always, but often minorities, the notion of family is under severe assault and for many simply disappeared sometime in the last generation. There is no scandal in American history that approaches this. We have assumed that at the heart of our culture there is an unshakeable, unmoveable structure called family - based on marriage and home. But we know that slavery intentionally destroyed African families. After slavery, segregation was aimed precisely at the integrity and dignity of black males: sexual stereotypes - "boy" instead of man. All of it very specifically denied generations of African-Americans the nurturing strength of stable marriage and family. And it worked. We did it. Sixty per cent of the black babies born next year will be born to unmarried mothers and grow up in homes essentially without men as permanent participants, and for them, life is not hopeful at all.

Suddenly we know about crimes committed by children: about the nine-year-old who shot his playmate after an argument about a game; about a rash of murders for sports jackets. The cover article in Sports Illustrated this week is "Your Sneakers or Your Life," about the epidemic of muggings and murders for basketball shoes. Suddenly we seem to have understood that if a society does not find a way to nurture its own nurturing institutions, the human results are going to be very tragic. "We are failing in the most elementary job of any society," says columnist Mona Charen, in an editorial this week.

We are, it would seem, newly aware that the family is a very important structure. Motion pictures and television are returning to the topic in a major way, including a number of situation comedies that seem,

at first, to belittle and demean the family. People are watching "The Simpsons," a cartoon sit-com about family life with almost religious zeal, says Newsweek because it is, first of all, realistic about families, and second, the family somehow manages to stay together even though its members can hardly stand each other.

Many families find "The Simpsons" closer to reality than "Father Knows Best." Garrison Keilor's most recent book, We Are Still Married, contains several funny and wise essays on family. In one he writes about taking four teen-agers along on a second marriage honeymoon; a five-week, eleven-state tour in a van. It was awful. The kids haven't spoken, haven't left their Walkmans long enough to see scenery for days. When one of them finally does, she says, "I'm tired of family. Why do we have to do so many things together? Why can't we split up?" [p. 190]

In another essay which pokes gentle fun at a whole array of modern, urban truisms, Rob and Nancy are an upwardly mobile couple with two children. They live in a loft in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood with upscale shops all around.

> "One evening at dinner the fourteen-year-old daughter announces, 'I hate you. I absolutely hate both of you, you're the most boring, odious, disgusting people I ever saw. You think you're cool but you're not, you're just ridiculous.'
>
> "Their fifteen-year-old son looks up from his plate and says, 'She's right.'
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> "Nancy smiled at both of them and set down her fork. 'Rob and I have something we want to share with you' she said softly.
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> "It's taken us a long time to face up to this, but you two are just not the right children for us. It's not your fault, any more than it is ours. Please try to understand. You're a constant source of aggravation - the mess, the endless clutter and noise and confusion and hostility. It makes for a stifling atmosphere for mine and Rob's relationship... We don't have time to grow. I choose not to accept that.
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> "Rob took Nancy's hand. 'I don't know if our marriage can survive your adolescence,' he said. 'We've come to a decision. We have to do what's best for us. We're going to sell you.'" [Lifestyle, p. 56ff]

As a matter of fact, one of the problems with family is that it has to bear up under the weight of an idealized, romanticized model that never existed anywhere except perhaps in Victorian imaginations, and the old TV situation comedies, and perhaps in our heart of hearts where we want our families and children and all our relationships to be perfect. And when people begin to measure their instutitions, their relationships, by standards that are unreal, they aren't going to measure up and then they

are going to feel guilty or angry or both, which is what a lot of people feel abut their families.

The Bible is actually very realistic about the family. The Christian faith uses the family as a metaphor for its most important assertion - in Jesus Christ we become children of God. But first, the Bible is very realistic about the human family.

The first family, as you know, is a disaster. Husband and wife lead one another into sin; each tries to avoid personal responsibility. He blames her; she blames the snake. They are thrown out of their home. Their two sons are jealous: one murders the other. That's how family starts in the Bible. Noah curses one of his sons for discovering him naked and drunk. Abraham lies and deserts his wife to save his neck. Jacob deceives his blind father, cheats his brother and steals from his father-in-law. His sons leave one of their brothers to die in the desert and then actually do sell him. There is only one family incident in the Gospels and that's the time Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Jerusalem when he's twelve and he gets lost for several days and they finally find him in the temple. That story is usually told to show how mature and smart Jesus was. What it really is about is a family: an adolescent who is pushing at the limits of parental authority. Mary says, in essence, "Where in the world have you been? We've been worried sick. We don't understand this at all," which is what every mother of every teen-ager has said at least a thousand times.

So families are not perfect. Nobody's is. Even Jesus'. But they are the place and the network of relationships in which we learn who we are, and how to be. And that is so important that we will be aware of it, and grateful for it, or guilty or angry about, all the rest of our lives.

So important is family that the Judeo-Christian religion uses it as a metaphor for its central assertion.

Early on, the nation of Israel knows itself as the family of God. That is unique in the history of religious ideas.

From the beginning, Jesus's own spirituality, what we can glean about his own relationship with God, is cast in specifically, familial, and parental terms.

His baptism, the event that solidifies his sense of self, and in turn, points him in the direction of his vocation, is a very moving and intimately personal encounter with a God - who is parental. It is a personal religious experience, not a public display. The voice comes to Jesus: he alone hears it.

"You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased."

Later, when he is talking about God, Jesus uses a stunning term, so important that it remains in the Aramaic language he spoke. "Abba." It is the intimate word for father. It is the word children would use in the intimacy and safety of the family circle.

Some have suggested that the only English equivalent is "Daddy," and while that sounds too sentimental and trivial to some ears, the sense of it is that the loving, affirming acceptance extended to children by parents, at their best, is the most descriptive way to talk about God's encounter with us in Jesus Christ.

When St. Paul, later, tries to explain what has happened to the divine-human relationship in Jesus Christ, the best he can do is return to this powerfully human metaphor. In Christ, we have been adopted by God. We who were orphans now have a parent: a family. We who know God as creator, as judge, as mysterious force behind the universe, as prime mover and first cause - in Jesus Christ now know God as parent, as mother, as father.

The Sacrament of Baptism is the sacrament of our acceptance and affirmation by God. We bring these dear children into our midst to affirm a magnificent truth about them: namely that they are loved and cared for absolutely by God. We Prebyterians insist that that happen publicly because it is a truth about all of us. It is a regular reminder of our adoption: that we are children of God, each and every one of us.

The idea is powerful, if we were blessed by loving parents who cared for us and affirmed us and nurtured us with patient and strong love. But it is also powerful even if we know about that love because it was not there for us.

We are able to accept others as we know ourselves to be accepted. We are capable of loving others as we know ourselves to be loved. The title of this sermon comes from a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes. It intrigues me.

> "Where we love is home,
> Home that our feet may leave,
> but not our hearts."

A Chicago attorney wrote an editorial in the Tribune Monday about children whose adoptions do not work out. She referred to eleven-year-old Tony whose adoptive parents returned him to an orphanage after six years. The author recalled how at the age of three, her parents had decided they could not go on.

"My earliest memory," she wrote, "is of standing at the doorway of my adoptive parents' home, knowing that I had committed some horrible crime, so horrible that my parents no longer wanted me."

That experience, even for one so young, makes it difficult to love and trust others or to feel good about oneself ever again. She wrote: "I hope Tony will understand that his rejections are not his fault. Sadly I think the odds are against Tony."

Unless, I wanted to say to her, unless Tony knows love and acceptance and affirmation. Unless he is found by someone capable of loving him with God's accepting love.

Unless - he - we - you and I are found by Jesus Christ, and in the finding experience the blessing of adoption by God, who is mother and father of us all.

As culture, as nation, it is time to put muscle and money into our sentimentality about family.

We know some things that work. And it is time to stop playing conservative/liberal political games and start providing them if, that is to say, we wish the family to survive.

We know that Operation Headstart works.

We know that a welfare system that penalizes people for being married doesn't work.

We know that when people do not have access to or cannot afford primary health care; when schools are substandard and underfunded; when there is nothing but single mothers, trying desperately to keep little ones alive... we should know that we are failing as a society... and that our children and their children will still be paying the penalty for our failure.

We know that for this system to work single mothers must work for a meaningful wage. And for that to happen, we must find a way to provide accessible day care, or pay the consequences.

We do know some answers and it seems to me that an appropriate way to celebrate Mother's Day is to go home and write a letter to the President at the White House and urge him to support the Child Care Bills now proceeding through Congress.

And while you're at it, call your parents - or somebody's parents - or whoever is parent to you. Tell them you love them. Let them know that you no longer hold it against them that they were not perfect. Don't forget your Mother on your birthday.

And remember Tony - whose adoptive parents unadopted him. And how twenty centuries ago St. Paul used that very image of adoption to describe what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

And remember him - Jesus - who taught us something almost unspeakably beautiful - "Abba" - the one who created us, affirms us, wants us to be, accepts us, loves us - as much as a mother affirms and wants and accepts and loves her newborn baby.

Amen.